

“BEAR HUGS FROM JESUS”

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Text: Luke 15:1-10 NLT

God’s Word: Leviticus 13:45-46 NLT

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15 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ² This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

³ So Jesus told them this story: ⁴ “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins^l and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”

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Imagine living in Jesus’ world and imagine being labeled a “sinner” in that world.

Now, I think we stumble over that term in this context because according to Christian doctrine we are all sinners, right? But this wasn’t necessarily the way people thought in the Jewish world that Jesus occupied some 2,000 years ago. Some people were considered sinners in need of repentance while others were not. They were “the righteous who had no need of repentance.”

When it comes to reading the Bible, context is everything. It was believed that people who had certain physical ailments such as blindness, a skin disease or those whose reproductive organs had been crushed were “sinners.” The poor were often thought of as being sinners since they couldn’t read the Law or perhaps couldn’t afford, financially, to purchase animals for sacrifice. You were a sinner if you didn’t eat the correct foods. You were a sinner if you did anything interpreted as work on the Sabbath. You might be considered a sinner if you had an unusual bodily discharge or

if you touched someone who did. A woman was a sinner during her monthly flow of blood. People with hunched backs were sinners and outcasts.

As we are told in Leviticus 13, such people “must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’...they must live alone; they must live outside the camp.”

This context makes it all the more understandable why the very fact that Jesus, who was considered to be a “holy man of God” by so many, but regularly welcomed “sinners and” ate “with them” was such a scandal. And this is what the Pharisees were grumbling about at the beginning of our Gospel Lesson for this morning, and throughout the Gospels. As a matter of fact, one of the main reasons Jesus was put to death was because, in the eyes of the religious rulers, He hung around all the wrong people.

Now, the Greek word for “welcomes” in verse 2, in the context of “This man welcomes sinners...” the Greek word for “welcomes” literally means to bring a person into your arms. It means to embrace someone. It’s not just a word of welcome when someone comes to the front door of your house—it is a great big bear hug from Jesus Himself!!! Isn’t that an awesome image? But it wasn’t an awesome image for those following the Law...because, according to biblical Law touching sinners made the person who touched them—unclean!

Jesus really stood in solidarity with the tax collectors, the outcasts, the lepers, the promiscuous, the hated, the poor, the lonely, the marginalized—you name it! And so, if Jesus gave a great big bear hug to all these otherwise tossed aside human beings, it’s no wonder they became His followers, His disciples, the ones who loved Him. He might very well have been the first person to show them love; the only person to accept them, to welcome them into His presence, to touch them—even.

Jesus was a really, really nice guy. And I hope we don’t miss that part about Him. Jesus was a gentle lover of people—all people. And people loved Him back because of this—everyone loved Him back because of this except for those who didn’t like the people He was welcoming and loving on!

I mean, Jesus was literally treading on the belief system of the Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes. He wasn’t doing what they thought their Bible said to do. He was turning everything upside down. He was a heretic in their eyes. He was a blasphemer. He was a law-breaker. He was NOT a good Bible believing Jew.

Because if He were, He would be shunning the sinners, not welcoming them, not touching them, not embracing them, not living with them. Jesus was just too inclusive for these religious leaders of His day.

And so, they thought it was God's will that they get rid of Him. And that's exactly what they tried to do by having Him nailed to the Cross. But even death can't stop LOVE and TRUTH.

Again, let's read the beginning of our lesson for this morning: *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"*

And Jesus doesn't defend Himself or say the Pharisees are exaggerating. On the contrary, He shows how right they are by telling them the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

In contrast to Jesus we live in a world of un-grace. If someone cuts us off in traffic, we call them names. If we feel someone has wronged us, we take them to court. That's why God's grace is so hard for us to fathom, and that's why Jesus talked about it a lot!

Phillip Yancey puts it well in his book: [What's So Amazing About Grace?](#)

"I have meditated enough on Jesus' stories of grace to let their meaning filter through," writes Yancey. "Still each time I confront their astonishing message I realize how thickly the veil of un-grace obscures my view of God. A housewife jumping up and down in glee over the discovery of a lost coin is not what naturally comes to mind when I think of God. Yet that is the image Jesus insisted upon."

A great Jewish scholar has noted that an absolutely new thing Jesus taught about God is that God actually searches for us! People may have agreed that those who came crawling home to God in self-abasement and prayed for pity might find it; but persons would never have conceived of a God Who went out to search for the lost, the sad, the dispirited, the sinful. But this is exactly what God does. God's love is so radical and so persistent.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus chooses to hang out with the wrong kind of people.

And He offered them something no one else could or would. In doing this Jesus was breaking the law, crossing lines, and making God just a little too easily available.

But that is because the starting place for Jesus is always grace:

- \*Searching not blaming
- \*Finding not punishing
- \*Rejoicing not condemning

The first question of Jesus is not about sin. It's not about who's in and who's out or who gets a dinner invitation. For Jesus, everyone is already in. Everyone is invited. The first question and main concern for Jesus is who is missing?

Notice the parables Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson for this morning. They're not about being wrong. They are about being lost. A sheep is lost. A coin is lost. There is nothing about blame or finding fault. That doesn't seem to be Jesus' concern. His concern is for the one who is lost,

missing, absent. Jesus doesn't explain how the lost one became lost. He doesn't blame or judge. That's not the issue. The issue is about the love and grace of God.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law want to make it about the character of the sinners and tax collectors. And that happens when sin is defined as only a legal category or failed behavior.

Jesus, however, makes it about God's character. That's the point in these two parables. They reveal God's character, God's grace, God's way of being toward us revealed in and through Jesus.

Robert Fulghum writes in his book, All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten:

"In the early, dry, dark of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide and seek. Did you ever have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. We would get mad back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. 'There's a hiding and there's a finding,' we'd say. And he'd say it was hide and seek not hide and give UP!"

No matter how bad people might feel about themselves. No matter how lost. No matter whether other people have given up looking...God never gives up. That is how much you and I and everyone else are loved!

A person posted the following on a local social media site: "Lost: dog. Brown fur, some of it missing due to the mange. Blind in one eye, partially deaf. Limps because of recent automobile accident. Slightly arthritic. Answers to the name of 'Lucky.'"

Lucky? You may not believe in luck, but surely that dog was blessed! He was blessed because someone wanted him, someone was searching for him, someone loved him.

I am blessed as well and so are you and everyone else. Someone loves us. Someone died for us. Someone goes searching for us until we are found. And then that someone gives us a great big bear hug and throws a party!!!

That is the grace and character of God revealed in Jesus Christ: searching, finding, rejoicing. They are three manifestations of God's grace that are ongoing in each of our lives depending on our circumstances.

Searching, finding, rejoicing. And ultimately it means there is a place set for each one of us at God's Table. We matter. We are desired by and important to God. This fellow Who welcomes sinners and eats with them is constantly searching for us, finding us and rejoicing over our presence at His table...and this is one reason the United Methodist Church has an Open Table during Holy Communion.

Do you need a bear hug from Jesus?